



Implementing a Dental Sealant Program for School-Aged Children

Public Health Problem

The number of teeth with dental decay (cavities) has declined dramatically among U.S. school-aged children because of preventive measures such as community water fluoridation and the use of fluoride toothpastes and mouthrinses. Despite these gains, dental decay remains a significant problem for many children, especially poor children and those of some racial and ethnic groups. In 2001, a statewide survey of third-grade children in Wisconsin indicated that 52% of white children had at least one permanent first molar with a dental sealant; however, only 21% of African American children and only 39% of Asian children had sealants.

Evidence That Prevention Works

Dental sealants, plastic coatings placed in the pits and grooves of molar teeth, have been proven to prevent dental cavities on these chewing surfaces. The U.S. Task Force for Community Preventive Services recently reviewed the scientific evidence of the effectiveness of school-based dental sealant programs. This evidence demonstrated a reduction in cavities of 60%. The Task Force issued a strong recommendation for school-based sealant delivery programs.

Program Example

Healthy Smiles for Wisconsin is a statewide program supported by CDC to improve the oral health of Wisconsin children through school and community partnerships. The program is a collaborative effort led by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Department of Health and Family Services. The statewide *Healthy Smiles for Wisconsin* coalition also includes more than 25 state, public, and private organizations. The coalition's *Seal a Smile Initiative* (dental sealant program), which began in October 2000, has helped establish 40 new community-based dental sealant programs during the 2000–2001 school year. As of fall 2002, more than 4,900 school-aged children in 40 counties across Wisconsin have received dental sealants through this program. Because the coalition has focused attention on sustainability, the number of school-aged children who receive dental sealants will continue to increase.

Implications

Dental sealants are a cost-effective way to prevent dental cavities in school-aged children. Increasing access to dental sealants among poor children would result in a significant decrease in tooth decay and the subsequent pain, suffering, costs for treatment, and lost school days. This program demonstrates the effectiveness of collaborative efforts to increase access to available health services and to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities among children who have dental sealants.